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SUBJECT: LABOR AND INDIGENOUS PROTESTS AGAINST FTA FIZZLE

REF: BOGOTA 9232

1. Summary. Public concerns over FTA negotiations were highlighted as indigenous groups and the major labor unions held anti-FTA protests around the country this week. While most of the demonstrations were peaceful and smaller than predicted, some protesters were injured and one protester died from a heart attack when riot police broke up an illegal road block. End Summary.

Volatile Indigenous Protests Occur Countrywide

2. Indigenous protesters from Antioquia, Caldas, Cauca, Quindio, and other regions demonstrated against the Andean FTA around the country from October 10-13. In Risaralda Department, about 25,000 protestors tried to block a local highway on October 11 but the police dispersed the crowd with tear gas. According to Interior Minister Sabas Pretelt, a 60-year-old man died from a heart attack that occurred during the turmoil. In another incident in Santa Rosa de Cabal, Embera Indians armed with machetes and stones confronted police. About 20 protesters were injured during that confrontation.

National Day of Labor Protests Is Peaceful

3. Colombia's leading labor unions (CTC, CUT, and CGT) predicted they would mobilize an estimated 500,000 workers for protest marches against the FTA and against the possible reelection of President Uribe in Bogota and the other departmental capitals on October 12. Turnout was much lower than predicted in Bogota; the Colombian national police estimated that approximately 4,000 protestors marched, although all registered groups participated. About 8,000 protestors demonstrated in Medellin, according to local media reports. Central Workers Union President Carlos Rodriguez stated that CUT membership came out in force since the union is overwhelmingly against the FTA due to fears that foreign companies will take advantage of better trade subsidies to gain advantage in the Colombian market.

4. Comment: As reported reftel, President Uribe has given strong public support to finishing FTA negotiations in the short term and has ordered his negotiating team to ensure a deal is concluded before the upcoming Colombian election season. This week's protests were nationwide but protestors came out in smaller numbers than demonstration organizers forecasted and their anti-FTA grievances were vague at best. In the end, the protests were a hiccup. End Comment.

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